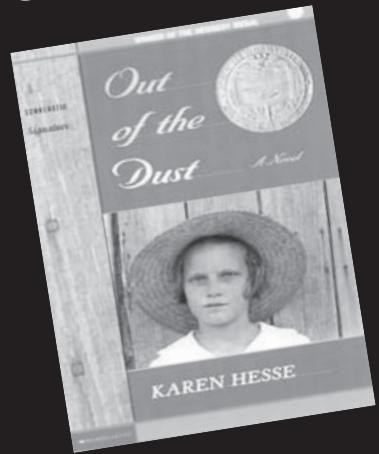




Weaving Colors into a White Landscape

Unpacking
the Silences
in Karen Hesse's
Children's Novel
Out of the Dust



Lisa Simon

The children's novel *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997) is an evocative portrayal of the drought and dust storms that devastated Midwestern farms in the 1930s. Through the voice of her 13-year-old narrator, Hesse intertwines history and free verse poetry to create what many readers, including myself, find to be a moving depiction of the Oklahoma Dustbowl experience. The novel's power has been widely recognized, winning a number of prestigious honors, including the Newberry medal.

In addition to its critical success, *Out of the Dust* is a valuable text in the classroom (King & Nisbet, 2002; Simon & Johnson, 2003). With the same setting as the opening of *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939) and with a writing style and vocabulary that make it immensely readable, *Out of the Dust* helps build background knowledge for students' understanding of Steinbeck's novel (Wilhelm, Baker, & Hackett, 2001).

Moreover, Hesse's novel offers readers historical context and complex characters that flesh out the stories Steinbeck tells about the Okie experiences, as well as those presented in other iconic Dustbowl texts like Dorothea Lange's photographs or Woody Guthrie's music. By using *Out of the Dust*, teachers offer students not only an engaging text, but one that can provide

academic scaffolds to other historical and literary texts.

As a result of all that this celebrated children's text offers, it is much more likely to be singled out for acclamation than critique. It is my stance in this article, however, that using Hesse's novel in the classroom is problematic without a critical literacy framework (Janks, 2000; McDaniel, 2004). That novel, like many current and classic texts, depicts the 1930s Dustbowl exclusively in relation to White experiences. Using that novel without questioning the limitations of those representations serves to privilege White experiences and to marginalize the experiences of Oklahomans of color as well as significant aspects of Oklahoma and U.S. history. The process of uncovering those marginalized stories with the goal of problematizing the dominant depiction of the Dustbowl is the focus of this article.

The Position of the Narrator

Stories are always framed and limited by their narrators' positions in the world. My focus on the histories of Oklahoma, a state I have never visited, is influenced by my positionality as are my accounts of the stories I present. In recognition of this influence, I preface my narration of these histories with an account of my positionality in relation to this article's focus.

I am a White female educator who identifies economically as coming from a struggling background but socially as middleclass. As contradictory as that statement may seem, it is the common

experience of many who grew up in a home headed by a divorced mother with minimal financial assistance from a professionally successful father. The covert financial uncertainty of my childhood, wherein we tried not to look poor at the same time we were receiving federal food subsidies, has made me intensely aware of the many social and cultural experiences and struggles that are hidden from view or politely ignored.

For a great deal of my life, this awareness led me to focus on experiences involving economic struggles. However, in the past ten years that focus has expanded to include examinations of marginalization in relation to racism. Living in an urban area, working, socializing with, and teaching people from an immense range of cultures, I have had invaluable opportunities to learn about stories that my education left out, dominated as it was by the White perspectives of my community and the mainstream.

This learning has been pivotal, painful, and addictive. In this article, I seek to describe the results of one experience with stories that have been historically marginalized. My hope in doing so is to encourage other educators to extend or begin their work in challenging the dominance of the White experience present in so many of the texts used within their classroom.

Privilege and Marginalization in Historical Depictions

As scholars have pointed out for years, historical accounts generally highlight the accomplishments and experiences of White

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men. More recently, stories of individual men and women of color and individual White women have begun to appear, but they are typically presented as exceptions, a framing that serves to reinforce the perception that history is primarily the stories of White men (McIntosh, 1986).

Outside of references to the 1960s Civil Rights and Feminist movements, presentations of the accomplishments of groups of White women, women and men of color, struggling economic classes, or varied immigrant status appear infrequently. Although the stories of women and men of all races and classes are available for those who look for them, they are consistently marginalized in the presentations of U.S. history found in textbooks and educational content (Nieto, 1999; Spring, 2001).

Despite great strides on the part of educators in recent years, the majority of texts used in school curricula continue to be dominated by representations of White experiences. When texts representing people of color are incorporated into the curriculum, it is often without any exploration or discussion of race (hooks, 1994). Generally, discussions of racism are confined to Black History Month and learning about the Civil Rights Movement or Martin Luther King, Jr.

Students who do not do independent research or do not learn about counter-narratives from their families, friends, or teachers will likely come to have one or more of the following misconceptions: racial tensions are primarily between Blacks and Whites; institutionalized racism was exclusively in the South; movements to address racial inequities were primarily urban movements; and what was in the past has little to do with our understandings today. Using texts like *Out of the Dust* without critiquing the absence of race serves only to reinforce those distortions.

It is a central premise of this article that not noticing race is an act of social injustice, as is not noticing or addressing the absence of race. Oklahoma in the 1930s was not populated exclusively by White people and, although at that time the population was predominantly White, the ways in which that dominance developed speak to some of the most complicated and traumatic racist themes in our country's history (Stein, 2004). As I go on to explore, these hidden stories challenge us to re-examine our understanding of the Dustbowl and the appeal that depictions like *Out of the Dust* have for so many people in the U.S.

Representations of the Dustbowl in *Out of the Dust*

The story in *Out of the Dust* is told through dated journal entries written in free verse poetry that cover the 1934-1935 time span. The poems, narrated by Billie Jo, a 13-year-old girl living on a farm in the Oklahoma Panhandle, depict aspects of daily life during those years. The entries interweave events of that time period with a young girl's attempts to make sense of her world, particularly the people who populate it and their struggles to establish equilibrium in a world of drought, dust storms, and migrating neighbors. The following excerpt presents some of these elements:

Ma has rules for setting the table.
I place plates upside down,
glasses bottom side up,
napkins folded over forks, knives and spoons.

When dinner is ready,
we sit down together
and Ma says,
"Now."

We shake out our napkins,
spread them on our laps,
and flip over our glasses and plates,
exposing neat circles,
round comments
on what life would be without dust.

(Hesse, 1994, p.21)

Early in the story, Billie Jo's pregnant mother is badly burned, as are Billie Jo's hands from her attempts to save her mother. Soon, Billie Jo's mother and new baby brother die, leaving her alone with her father "who wanted a boy" (Hesse, 1994, p.3). The remainder of the novel explores this father-daughter relationship and their separate and collective struggles to survive in the environmental and economic disasters faced by Oklahoma farmers.

Their experiences parallel those that were depicted in literature, photography, documentaries, and music during the 1930s drought. Many of those representations, like the photographs of Dorothea Lange and Russell Lee or the music of Woody Guthrie, have assumed canonical, even iconic status in popular understandings of that time period.

Out of the Dust's narrative frame both relies upon and disrupts those famous texts' representations of the Dustbowlers. For example, adult male Dustbowlers are typically depicted as dignified and stoic farmers, fighting against environmental odds that have been exacerbated by the incompetence, selfishness, or cruelty of businessmen and/or the government. Hesse problematizes that depiction with Billie Jo's father.

Portrayed through Billie Jo's perspec-

tive, the father's taciturnity is not noble but borders on selfish. His silence leads others to blame Billie Jo for the accident that killed her mother even though his carelessness was a contributing factor. Yet, this father is a complex character, committed to farming his land, longing for a son rather than the daughter he has, and so lost in sorrow for his dead wife and son that he can't see his daughter's physical and emotional pain.

I have given my father so many chances
to understand, to
reach out, to
love me. He once did.
I remember his smile,
his easy talk.
Now there's nothing easy between us.
Sometimes he takes notice of me,
like coming after me in the dust.
But mostly I'm invisible.
Mostly I'm alone...

(Hesse, 1997, pp. 195)

Billie Jo's character also challenges the stereotype of Dustbowl children who are presented as either helpless, as in Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (Lange, 1936a), or mutely enduring the most desperate circumstances (see e.g., Lange, 1936b). These depictions of childhood vulnerability and disempowerment are turned on their head by Billie Jo's narration. While she endures terrible losses and suffering, she is never portrayed as helpless. Even when the situation is terrifying, Billie Jo's strengths are evident:

The piano is some comfort in all this.
I go to it and I forget the dust for hours,
testing my long fingers on wild rhythms,
but Ma slams around in the kitchen
when I play
and after a while she sends me to the store.
Joe De La Flor doesn't see me pass him by;
he rides his fences, dazed by dust.
I wince at the sight of his rib-thin cattle.
But he's not even seeing them.
I look at Joe and know our future is
drying up
and blowing away with the dust.

(Hesse, 1997, p. 39)

With *Out of the Dust*, Hesse has created characters who add dimension and complexity to the dominant depictions of 1930s Oklahoma; yet, because there is no exploration of race, the novel serves both to increase the spotlight on White experiences and to present that focus as natural. In the world of the novel, Billie Jo and her family are enfolded within White privilege even as their Whiteness and its accompanying privilege are unmarked.

The extent to which privilege influences their lives is suggested only by imagining how different the story would be if it involved a family of color. As White

farmers, Billie Jo's family had access to federal support that complicated citizen tests denied many Mexican American families who had worked in Oklahoma for years and generations. Native American families were segregated to land next to the Panhandle, the setting for *Out of the Dust*.

This area comprised less than half of the territory given to them when the Five Southern Tribes were forced to move from the southern United States. And the many African American families living in Oklahoma at that time were constrained by Jim Crow laws and prevented from voting by notorious literacy tests. Yet none of these realities enter into the depictions of Billie Jo's daily life and, as a result, recognition of the social injustices faced by many Oklahomans is also omitted.

In the following section, I describe the steps involved in doing critical literacy research, the process that I used in order to uncover narratives that countered the silences in *Out of the Dust* (see Figure 1). In this, my concern is to show how this process is relevant not only to that text or its time period but to all research that seeks to challenge the inequities of historical depictions.

I then present some of the histories of Oklahomans of color accessed as a result of the research process before going on to explore the ways I addressed the additional challenges that emerged. I conclude with an examination of the pedagogical implications of this process.

Figure 1: The Critical Literary Process

Steps in the Critical Literacy Research Process

Step 1: Recognize that the information presented in a text is incomplete and that marginalized stories are available and can be found: Ask: whose experiences do I have information about and whose are absent? For example, the Dustbowl accounts depict only White farmers and migrant workers. African American, American Indian and Latina/o stories are omitted.

Step 2: Look for absent stories: A good place to begin this search is an internet search engine. Use key words that describe the groups whose stories you've identified are absent. Start with the most general terms, continually refining your search as you access sources relating to missing stories. For example: African American + Oklahoma + 1930 leads to links which give an overview of the Tulsa Riot in 1921 and the Black town movement. These links provide new key words that lead to greater specifics about those histories. Continue to follow these links to access additional sources (including print, images, music).

Step 3: Organizing information: Organize the information with a goal to sharing the counternarratives you've accessed from Steps 1 and 2. Note where there are gaps in your information or additional marginalizations and consider factors that could contribute to these absences. Continue researching to address those gaps by repeating Step 2 and/or moving on to Step 4.

Step 4: Primary sources: Analyze the gaps in the information you've gathered. What stories or depictions dominate? What is missing? For example, do you have information only about economic struggles? Men? Immigrants? Consider the kinds of primary sources that would allow you to flesh out and complicate the information you've gathered. For example, look at the U.S. Census breakdowns, newspaper accounts, contemporary photographs, and songs lyrics.

Step 5: Create a new text: Using the information gathered through the secondary and primary sources, construct a text that depicts the counternarratives you have tapped into through your research. These creations might be expository essays or historical fiction or might involve several media. Their goal is to tell the stories you have uncovered, complicate the mainstream depiction and point to the interests which are threatened when marginalized stories are highlighted.

The Critical Literacy Inquiry Process

The first step in the critical literacy research process is the recognition that marginalized stories are available and can be found. While this step may seem obvious, in the face of historical depictions focusing on White experiences, that recognition is crucial. Scholars in history and in education have long recognized that the information presented in textbooks and in cultural representations tell only part of the story.

Those interested in critical literacy (see e.g., McDaniel, 2004; Janks, 2000) argue that the stories that are presented are there to serve particular interests. Understanding that power is held and maintained by dominant groups and that this power is present in the construction of texts (Janks, 2000), allows us to look for what has not been presented, to question gaps and absences (Stewart, 1994).

In this first step, it is helpful to ask: Whose experiences do I have information about and whose are absent? In *Out of the Dust*, the stories depict White men and women who are economically struggling. Other emphases that dominate historical depictions are the experiences of men of all races, political leaders or "winners" (Crocco, 1997), groups that are economically comfortable, heterosexuals, English speakers, and relationships between African Americans and White Americans. The

process of critical literacy research allows us to complicate and expand such foci.

Looking for absent stories is the second step of the critical literacy research process. In this step, the availability, via the on-line databases, of multiple sources in a range of modalities is immensely important. By typing key words into an internet search engine's command line, a researcher can quickly access sources that will allow her/him to begin answering initial questions and/or offer additional key terms for an increasingly refined search.

For example, by simply typing into Google "Oklahoma + African American" I was linked to several entries on Oklahoma Black towns. Each source that I found provided additional information and allowed me to add to my knowledge, focus on gaps and questions, and refine my search by identifying additional key terms.

After developing a general overview of the histories of Oklahomans of color and identifying specific questions to explore more deeply in relation to my focus on the Dustbowl, I turned to the historical database available through JSTOR to access academic, peer-reviewed journals devoted to historical analyses. However, because in a critical inquiry it is important to remain aware of the limits on what gets published in scholarly journals (hooks, 1990), I also sought to include sources written for the layperson and those directly addressing an audience of color rather than the primarily White audience to which the academic writers were accountable. This movement between multiple databases made it possible to triangulate information and find information that challenged dominant depictions.

In my research process on Oklahomans of color, these first two steps of the process allowed me to access some of the complex and layered histories of Native Americans and African Americans. While the research process continued as I organized my understandings in the write-up (Step 3), the bulk of the historical research was completed by relying on secondary sources.

However, researching the Latina/o experience in Oklahoma was a strikingly different experience.¹ In the following section I present the histories that emerged from the first two steps of the research process and consider the potential they offer for addressing the inequities inherent to *Out of the Dust*. I then go on to present the additional steps to the critical literacy research process that I developed in order to address the challenges encountered in searching for the stories of Mexican-American Oklahomans.

Histories of Oklahoma

A quick look at the demographics throughout Oklahoma's history reveals that since European contact in 1541, the White population has always had a strong presence. What that quick look obscures is that from the 1830s through the Civil War a significant portion of what became Oklahoma was recognized as Native American land. Even this description is problematic, conjuring up as it does the image of indigenous Native American communities, roaming and farming the Great Plains for generations.

While the history of Oklahoma includes the influences and stories of many indigenous tribes who came and left and returned again, it also includes the forced migration of several Native American communities from Southeast U.S. In the 1830s, Oklahoma's Native American population increased as a result of the federal government's decision, under Andrew Jackson, to forcibly relocate Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole tribes to the area that became Oklahoma. These communities are commonly referred to as the Five Southern Tribes.

The Cherokee relocation from Georgia, known as The Trail of Tears, resulted in the deaths of over 1,000 people. The forced migration of the other four groups was less numerically devastating but no less traumatic. By the early 1840s, the Five Southern Tribes were settled in Indian Territory, an area that comprises all of what is today Oklahoma.

Oklahoma's African-American population also increased as a result of that relocation. Many in the Five Southern Tribes participated in slavery and brought with them African Americans as enslaved persons (Doran, 1978). By 1860, enslaved African Americans outnumbered Whites in the Indian territories by 3 to 1 (Doran, 1978).

Thus, woven into the origins of this state, a hundred years before the time period of *Out of the Dust*, are the complicated strands of European colonization, abuse of indigenous people, and the enslavement of African Americans. Moreover, these strands challenge simplified understandings of the relation between Native Americans and African Americans. In Oklahoma/Indian Territories, few Whites had the economic means to participate in slavery whereas many in Native American communities did (Doran, 1978). Moreover, as Doran points out, the majority of those participating in slavery were descendants of White-Native American unions.

These complexities increased when,

after the Civil War, the land that made up Indian Territory and previously deemed worthless by the White settlers and government was seen as desirable by both Whites and newly free African Americans. In response to this changed view as well as to punish the Five Southern Tribes' lack of support for the Union, the federal government forced the tribes to cede great amounts of their territory. Indian Territory was reduced to the area next to the Oklahoma Panhandle, the setting for *Out of the Dust*.

The opening of Indian Territory offered land runs where, for a minimal fee, individuals could grab plots of land formally belonging to the Five Southern Tribes. This opportunity to own land in a territory without an institutionalized history of slavery made Oklahoma an attractive site for many newly emancipated African Americans:

[In the 1880s,] many Blacks immigrated into [Oklahoma] territory. They came mainly from Kansas in the West and from Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, Tennessee and Texas in the South. They came as unorganized individuals and as planned colonies. They rode the trains, if they could, and when they could not they either rode horses or walked. Some walked to Oklahoma from as far away as Little Rock and Memphis. (Hamilton, 1977, p. 272)

For some African American leaders, pre-state Oklahoma offered a possibility greater than land and freedom—the potential of creating an all-Black state. This promise, augmented by the real estate opportunity in the opening of Indian Territory, became a key selling point for those promoting the development of all-Black towns in Oklahoma.

The Black town movement was propelled by several African-American men, often working with White financers, who marketed plots of Oklahoma land to the African-American community in the South (Hamilton, 1977). The marketing sought to encourage the emigration of African Americans with enough money to sustain themselves for the time it would take for farms and the town to develop; those without sufficient funds were discouraged (Hamilton, 1977).

Although this movement has been historically marginalized, it was at the time significant enough to become a debate in the African American community. Celebrated African American leaders like Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, and Frederick Douglass were drawn into the debate on the wisdom of migrating to what was still seen as the frontier. Washington

and Douglass supported the movement, Douglass writing in a letter to one of the movement's leaders in 1892:

It is good that Oklahoma opens its gates and spreads its rich lands to welcome him home, to welfare, freedom, independence and happiness. (*quoted in Hamilton, 1977, p. 275*)

Excerpts from Douglass' letter were published in one Black town's newspaper. A few months later, Ida B. Wells responded in the same paper with arguments against the emigration movement, stating her view that:

[Oklahoma] did not offer sufficient inducements to warrant an indiscriminate exodus of our people, in that there appeared to be no ready employment to be had. (*quoted in Hamilton, 1977, p. 274*)

By 1907, 15 years after this debate, Oklahoma had become a state and by 1910 African Americans were the largest group of color living in Oklahoma, their number of 137,612 almost double the population of Native Americans (U.S. Census, 2002). However, the dream of Oklahoma as an all-Black state had vanished with statehood. Despite the success of the towns and the political power of African Americans within them, Black Oklahomans were denied political power outside town boundaries (Thornbrough citing Crockett, 1979).

White factions had sought to write segregation laws into the new state's constitution. Although such restrictions were kept out of the state constitution, they were soon written into state law. When the 1910 grandfather clause was passed, African Americans were effectively denied the right to vote (Littlefield, Jr. & Underhill, 1973). By 1915, many of the Black towns "were dead or dying" (Cohen, 1980, p. 944).

While some Black towns did survive, the majority failed and their residents left Oklahoma or moved to the cities. In the 1920s, Oklahoma City and Tulsa had thriving African American communities; however White racism, which reached a horrific peak during the Tulsa riots in 1921, continued to affect those communities and the density of the African-American population. In *Paradise* (1999), Toni Morrison entwines this history with the mainstream depictions of the Dustbowl and the Great Depression:

From Haven, a dreamtown in Oklahoma Territory, to Haven, a ghosttown in Oklahoma State. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948.... One thousand citizens in 1905 becoming five hundred by 1934. Then two hundred, then eighty as cotton collapsed or railroad companies laid their tracks elsewhere.

Subsistence farming, once the only bounty a large family needed, became just scrap farming as each married son got his bit, which had to be broken up into more pieces for his children, until finally the owners of the bits and pieces who had not walked off in disgust welcomed any offer from a white speculator, so eager were they to get away and try someplace else. (pp. 5-6)

With its focus on African American experiences in Oklahoma, Morrison's novel offers a powerful example of the ways in which a text can incorporate both marginalized and mainstream histories. In her novel, the stories of African American Oklahomans intersect with the Dustbowl history presented in *Out of the Dust*. But the reverse is not true. The experiences of African Americans are invisible in Hesse's novel and, as a result, 1930s Oklahoma is depicted as if inhabited exclusively by White people.

Although the population of African Americans and Native Americans continued to increase between the 1920 and 1930 Census, Oklahoma seems not to have been viewed by either community as an area in which their people or hopes could dominate. Between 1930 and 1940, the time period for *Out of the Dust*, both groups' populations declined and this decline undoubtedly contributed to the marginalization of their experiences during the Dustbowl.

However, also marginalized is the institutionalized racism that was a key cause in the diminishing numbers of these communities. Moreover, because the histories of African American and Native American Oklahomans are consistently presented as separate rather than integrated aspects of their state's history, it becomes possible to overlook the contributions they made and the inequities they faced.

Questioning the dominance of White experiences in *Out of the Dust* led to the highlighting of themes and perspectives that are consistently marginalized in mainstream historical accounts. The histories of the Black town movement and the participation of Native Americans in slavery challenge representations that present people of color exclusively in relation to White oppression. These histories also make it impossible to ignore that laws designed to restrict members of certain races were passed in the Southwest as well as the Southeast, and with the goal of disempowering communities of color who had both wealth and political savvy. By uncovering marginalized stories, our understanding of the history that continues to influence us becomes more complex and textured.

Our understandings are further com-

plicated when questions about Latina/o Oklahoma's experiences are introduced. For, although American Indian and African American histories are marginalized in general accounts of Oklahoma, information about them is easily accessible to anyone doing a database search using the terms "Black Towns" or "Native Americans" in conjunction with Oklahoma.

Moreover, those histories fit narratives that are becoming increasingly dominant. The U.S. government's repeatedly broken promises to and abuse of Native American communities frame the experiences of the Five Southern Tribes in Oklahoma. The leadership and self-sufficiency

of Black communities and their multiple and powerful resistances to White racism help make coherent the narratives framing the Black town movement.

While there are significant gaps in information about female experiences in the African American and Native American communities, the presentations of male experiences recognize a range in class, education, and wealth in both groups—in fact, that diversity is a key element in the narratives depicting both communities' histories.

However, when the critical literacy inquiry process expands to ask about the experiences of Latinas/os in Oklahoma, it

Figure 2: Mexico and Oklahoma's Inter-woven History

1541 Coronado and his troops are the first Europeans to enter the area that will become Oklahoma. For the next 300 years, Spain and then Mexico claimed all or parts of the area that would become Oklahoma.

1601 Juan De Onate crosses the Canadian River into Oklahoma. Coronado's and De Onate's visits supported Spain's claim of the North American territories; however, most Spanish settlement and colonization were far to the South of what became Oklahoma.

1763 Treaty for the Seven Years War (a war between France, Spain, and England over the territory which included Oklahoma). The treaty gives Spain Louisiana which includes the area of Oklahoma.

1800 Treaty of San Ildefonso: Spain agrees to cede Louisiana to France. It is not clear what the boundaries of the territory are and so Oklahoma remains under Spanish control.

1803 The Louisiana Purchase: France sells Louisiana Territory to U.S. The border of the territory remains unclear. At this point, it has not been determined whether the area that will become Oklahoma is part of this land transfer or not. The area remains under Spanish control.

1812 Spanish Constitution of Cadiz: everyone living on land under Spanish rule is given full rights of citizenship, regardless of race. Thus, all living in Oklahoma territory have full rights no matter their race. In the U.S. only "free Whites" have such rights.

1819 Adams-Onis Treaty or Transcontinental Treaty: U.S. and Spain agree that Texas and the Oklahoma Panhandle remains with Spain but all other territory including the remaining areas of Oklahoma are controlled by the U.S.

1821 Mexico wins independence from Spain.

1836 Texas revolts against Mexican rule.

1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends the U.S.-Mexican War. Mexico cedes Texas and Oklahoma Panhandle to the U.S.. Mexicans and Indians living in formerly Mexican territories are allowed to stay and become U.S. citizens. By international treaty, those living on ceded lands maintain the rights they had under their previous government. However, in actuality those living on formerly Mexican lands lose or risk their rights as citizens. This resolution has little direct effect on Oklahoma because no Mexican citizens were living in the Panhandle.

1882-1912 A period of significant construction on railroads crossing the United States towards Mexico. "No immigrant group in American history has been so intimately tied to the railroads as the Mexican" (Smith, 1980, p. 35). Many men from Mexico come to Oklahoma and areas near to work on the railroad. High labor need for workers lead to wages that are higher than other employment opportunities as well as relaxed restrictions on immigration from Mexico.

1890 Increasing numbers of Mexican-origin workers employed in Oklahoma coal fields. In 1929, 61 coal workers are killed in a McAlester coal mine. Over half are Mexican-American.

1910 Mexican Revolution begins. Many Mexicans immigrated to U.S., including to Oklahoma. Population numbers continue to increase until the Great Depression.

Great Depression Employment opportunities for Mexican Americans are even more severely curtailed than for Whites. "Aliens" can not be employed in New Deal programs. During the Great Depression and the Dustbowl drought, Mexican Americans who could not fulfill complicated citizenship requirements were denied employment relief from the WPA.

1930s "Mexican Repatriation"—an extensive deportation program of Mexican immigrants including their American-born children from U.S. to Mexico.

1931 Three Mexican college students driving home to Mexico are approached by two Anglo Oklahoma police officers. Two of the students are shot and killed. The murders receive international attention with presidential involvement from both countries. The jury returns a verdict of "not guilty."

1940 In the census, Latino/a U.S. residents are counted as a separate race for the first time.

(Kiser, 1975; Mechela, 1993; Smith, 1980; Sonnichsen, 1994)

becomes clear that marginalization has gradations. Although parts of the land that now make up Oklahoma were controlled by Spain or Mexico for over 300 years (1541-1848), Steps 1, 2, and 3 of the research process resulted in only a list of events and forces involving Mexican-Americans in Oklahoma (see Figure 2) and general information about economically struggling Mexicans immigrants. These results were a sharp contrast to the narratives involving charismatic leaders, tragic episodes and cameos of celebrated figures like Frederick Douglass, Andrew Jackson and Ida B. Wells which emerged through searches on African American and American Indian experiences.

My first interpretation of this difference was that I had not done enough research and so I increased my efforts. But even sources which directly addressed the Mexican American experience in Oklahoma (e.g., Smith, 1980), or included interviews with Mexican immigrants to the U.S. (Gamio, 1931), left me with more questions than answers about the Mexican Oklahoma experience. Even given the language barrier which prevented me from accessing sources not translated into English, the lack of information was striking. By organizing the information I had and discussing and reading about other critical literacy inquiries (see particularly Norton, 2005), I began to understand that the stories of Mexican Americans in Oklahoma involved a more extensive marginalization than appeared to be true for African American and Native American Oklahomans.

Recognizing this marginalization led to the development of Step 4 of the critical literacy research process: analyzing the kinds of information that were available, considering the factors that were contributing to the absence of information, and searching for primary sources which could fill in the gaps. That work with primary sources then led to Step 5: creation of new texts. In the following section, I describe these steps accompanied, as above, with examples that speak to the silences in *Out of the Dust*.

Critiquing Secondary Sources

In *The Mexicans in Oklahoma*, Smith (1980) provides the following information about the time period in which *Out of the Dust* is set:

The depression years were severe times for Mexicans in [Oklahoma]. Many had come during or after World War I and had little time to adjust to American culture. Unquestionably most had arrived penniless, and a majority lived on the edge of poverty even in good times. Mexicans were

usually classified as temporary residents. Most had taken no steps toward naturalization, and only a slight faction had become American citizens. Frequently they did not speak or read English; even those born in the United States often did not read or write the language. Although the extreme hostility and segregation Mexicans experienced in Texas were not as severe in Oklahoma, racial prejudice was always present. When most Americans found it difficult to survive the crisis—witness the thousands of “Okies” who fled the state—it was understandable that few Mexicans could endure the tribulations of the period. (p. 51)

In this excerpt, Smith contrasts Mexican-origin Oklahomans with “Americans” and describes them solely in relation to citizenship, education, language, and economic struggles. That depiction’s limitations are exacerbated by his focus on what Mexican-origin Oklahomans were not or did not have rather than what they were or did. As a result, although the information provided is directly relevant to my question about the marginalized histories of Mexican-origin Oklahomans, its biases are as problematic as those noted above in *Out of the Dust*.

Smith’s presentation highlights the need to maintain a critical stance even with information that relates to the marginalized histories we are seeking. A critical reading reveals that, throughout his book devoted to documenting Mexican Oklahomans’ history, he refers almost exclusively to the “Mexican-born residents of Oklahoma” (p. 52). His few references to the children of these immigrants are casual and never explored further.

As in the above passage, his focus is on the struggles, particularly in relation to employment, faced by immigrants who are consistently depicted as poor, uneducated, and unable to speak or read English. The resulting generic depictions are a contrast to the complex depictions of Native American and African American Oklahomans presented earlier which highlight the range of education, wealth, and political power represented in the respective communities.

The few secondary sources that discussed Mexican-origin Oklahomans were dominated by stereotypes about poor, uneducated, illegal immigrants. Questioning this dominance was a significant step in that it spurred me to speculate about who that privileging might serve and, equally important, whose stories were overshadowed by the emphasis on immigration (Janks, 2000; Norton, 2005). With this focus I was able to see how the immigration narrative served to marginalize the history

of U.S. colonization and the political complexity of defining Latinos/as as a distinct race.

In 1819, the Adams-Onis /Transcontinental Treaty transferred most of the land that is Oklahoma from Spain to U.S. control, and in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo gave the U.S control of the Oklahoma Panhandle as well as the land that today makes up the Southwest U.S. These transfers directly affected the lives of Mexican citizens living in the areas which had been ceded. Both treaties dictated that inhabitants of the transferred lands be extended U.S. citizenship. However, by staying on their land, inhabitants of formerly Mexican lands faced the possibility of losing significant civil rights. As Menchaca’s (1993) research into legislation and court cases in relation to the 1848 treaty demonstrates, “Anglo American legislators violated the treaty and refused to extend Mexicans full political rights” (p. 584).

The primary justification for violating the treaty was that Mexicans were people of Indian descent “and therefore could not claim the political privileges of White citizens” (Menchaca, 1993, p. 584). At the time of the treaty, anyone in the U.S. constructed as Native American was vulnerable to being imprisoned and even enslaved. While Mexico had done away with legalized racial barriers in 1812, in the U.S. it would be more than half a century before anyone other than “free Whites” was allowed full protection. As a result, many Mexicans protected themselves by identifying as White to maintain the civil rights they would otherwise lose as a result of the 1848 treaty’s land transfer (Menchaca, 1993).

The focus on immigration that dominates the discussion of Mexican-origin Oklahomans serves to marginalize the stories about the Mexican families who inhabited land in those transferred areas as well as the institutionalized racism that they and other Oklahomans had to negotiate. Challenging the historical emphasis on the Mexican Americans immigration experience offers access to a range of stories involving wealth, land, and the fluidity of race. Only by marginalizing such stories can the dominant construction of Mexicans as economically struggling outsiders to the U.S be maintained.

However, identifying the ways in which that dominant framing could contribute to marginalizing complex histories did not automatically result in finding those stories. Using the new angle led to secondary sources that either documented Mexican-American experiences only in the Southwest or highlighted the immigration

narrative in relation to Oklahoma. Yet, in the latter's depictions, as in the following excerpt, was evidence that more complex stories existed:

The Mexican miner's average annual income was about \$379, but a few earned over \$600 per year. Almost all Mexican families had to supplement the father's wages. *In some cases children worked in the mines and contributed all or a portion of their income for family expenses.* About 20 percent of the Mexican households kept lodgers or boarders, and women frequently took in washing and ironing from the single Mexican men. (Smith, 1980, p. 43, *emphasis added*)

In this passage, although his focus is on the men born in Mexico, Smith's references to their children serve as reminders that the experiences of Mexican Americans include generations of life in the U.S. While secondary sources were not available to flesh out those stories, primary sources were. Thus, I developed a fifth step to the critical literacy research process: combining the awareness that had emerged through questioning textual biases with the slim pieces of historical information I could find.

The goal in this step was to create a text that both addressed the gaps and challenged dominant narratives. In this I was inspired by Alford's (1999) social studies curriculum work incorporating the writing of historical fiction and Janks' (2000) call for including in textual critique the production of new texts that seek to challenge marginalization.

Constructing Historical Fiction To Challenge Social Inequities

To locate primary sources that could challenge the immigrant narrative that dominated secondary sources, I turned to the 1930 Census data for Oklahoma

towns. Although I could not locate information about the towns in the Oklahoma Panhandle, census information was available for a county southeast of *Out of the Dust*'s setting (McIntosh County Census Records, 2005). Locating these records, I searched through the "color" category for the "m" that indicated the individual was of Mexican descent. I double-checked this search by also looking for Spanish-sounding surnames.

In the town of Checotah, I found Jim Sanchas, who the census enumerator, Wynonna Swafford, had identified as Mexican. I saw that the names that came before and after, including those with Anglo-sounding surnames, had also been identified as Mexican and that they were related to Jim Sanchas through blood, marriage, or housing (see Figure 3).

To go further in finding information about the experiences of Mexican American Oklahomans during the time of the Dustbowl, I needed to interpret this data by creating a new text. I sought to do this in a way that responds to Janks' (2000) call for the creation of texts that embody the insights that emerge from critique. Doing so takes advantage of the power of production and creativity to challenge and change dominating and limiting narratives.

I therefore created two texts. The first organized the census information into a family tree which demonstrated the long U.S. residence of the individuals the census identified as Mexican (see Figure 4). While this text challenged the immigration narrative, I also wanted to create a text which could more fully address the complexity and contradictions of Mexican American Oklahoman's experiences, including the racism that was part of their experience.

Because this research project had

begun in dialogue with *Out of the Dust*, I wrote a text that paralleled the style of that novel, poetry, and which also engaged with the social inequities Hesse had left out:

The Census Taker

Wynona Swafford came
to our door today to
take our census. She
didn't recognize us
even though we've
lived in Checotah as long as she.

I think that's why
my mother got so nervous.
Because at first she smiled.
But when

Miz Swafford looked at her like a stranger,
when
my mother offered her a glass of water
my mother forgot
how to speak English

She called my father but he
must have forgotten
how to hear and my aunt Bennie
just laughed and shook her head
So then she called me

With that look that told me not to say no
even though
I was supposed to be watching Carlo.
So

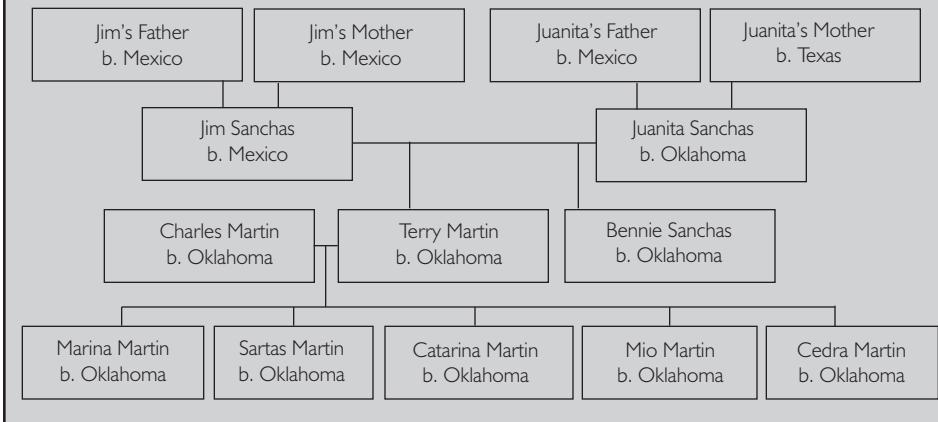
I picked up Carlo
and came to stand beside her

Miz Swafford asked the questions so quickly
hand gripped tightly around the pen
anxious and
doubtful about
having to write my answers down on the
forms,
yellow-white with thick black lines and
boxes
But the questions were easy:
"Seven years old," and "Oklahoma,"
I told her.
"And where was your mother born?"
"Here," I said. She wrote it down
but she looked at my mother

Figure 3: From Checotah's 1930 Census

Page Number	Line Number	Household/ Family	Surname	Given Name	Relationship	Sex	Color	Age (Yr/Mo)	Marital Status	Age When First Married,	Birth Place of Person	Birth Place of Father	Birth Place of Mother
43	85	23/24	SANCHAS	Jim	Head	M	Mex.	66	Married	25	Mex	Mex	Mex
43	86	23/24	SANCHAS	Juanita	Wife	F	Mex.	59	Married	18	OK	Mex	TX
43	87	23/24	SANCHAS	Bennie	Daughter	F	Mex.	17	Single		TX	Mex	OK
43	88	23/24	MARTIN	Charles	Son/Lodger	M	Mex.	30	Married	24	OK	Mex	TX
43	89	23/24	MARTIN	Terry	Daughter	F	Mex.	23	Married	18	OK	TX	OK
43	90	23/24	MARTIN	Martina	Granddaughter	F	Mex.	7	Single		OK	TX	OK
43	91	23/24	MARTIN	Mio	Grandson	M	Mex.	2/3	Single		OK	TX	OK
43	92	23/24	MARTIN	Catarina	Granddaughter	F	Mex.	4	Single		OK	TX	OK
43	93	23/24	MARTIN	Sartas	Grandson	M	Mex.	5	Single		OK	TX	OK
43	94	23/24	MARTIN	Cedra	Granddaughter	F	Mex.	0/7	Single		OK	TX	OK
43	95	23/24	PADINEZ	Joe	Lodger	M	Mex.	45	Single		OK	TX	OK

Figure 4
The Sanchas-Martin Family Tree



and I knew she was wondering why, if she was born here, she couldn't talk.

But she did talk when Miz Swafford pointed to Carlo.

"And this one?"

"Two," I told her.

"Mi hijo," my mother explained but Miz Swafford heard Mio.

Wrote that down in the name box, and I didn't say a word.

April 10, 1930

Conclusion

It would be hard to find a setting in U.S. history more removed from my experience of living in New York City in the beginning of the second millennium than the Oklahoma Dustbowl. Yet the research process that I've documented in this article repeatedly demonstrated to me the relevance of that state's history to my life and historical understandings. Events like the Louisiana Purchase, the Mexican Revolution, and the Civil War became meaningful when my goal was to learn how those events related to the lives of the communities I sought to understand.

Each clue I unearthed pointed to another and multiple texts emerged to remind me of the presence of these marginalized stories. Flora Thompson, the central figure of Lange's *Migrant Mother* had a Cherokee heritage and had grown up in Indian Territory (Stein, 2003), the backdrop of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* was Oklahoma's Black town movement, and a children's novel, *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2002), described the Mexican American Dustbowl experience. Each link involved me in another layer or dimension of history, making it difficult to stop my search for more stories of 1930's Oklahoma.

In this article, in addition to sharing

some of the uncovered narratives that challenge and add complexity to *Out of the Dust*'s depictions of 1930's Oklahoma, I have sought to document the critical literacy research process which allowed me to access those histories. My goal was threefold: (1) to demonstrate the importance of consistently questioning what has been left out in relation to historical texts used in our classrooms; (2) to inspire educators to extend or begin their work in critiquing class texts and in incorporating marginalized perspectives into their teaching; and (3) to offer specific steps for educators interested in using a critical literacy research process with their students.

There is tremendous value in addressing the inequities embodied in school-sanctioned texts, particularly those which emphasize only one group's experience. When this process was done with *Out of the Dust*, it became clear that what has been hidden are stories that challenge racist visions of communities of color as well as those that point to some of the most shameful and traumatic themes of U.S. history.

It also highlighted some of the agencies and forms of resistance enacted by Oklahomans who faced institutionalized racism. Such explorations of history are consistently marginalized in school textbooks, but as I have sought to demonstrate, the reading, questioning, seeking for and writing of narrative continues to offer a place for engaging in that complexity.

Critical literacy research is valuable because it offers students the opportunity to use and develop literacy skills in a purposeful and engaging way. To uncover stories that are at first and even second glance hidden, students must take on the stance of a sleuth: reading critically, questioning and monitoring their understandings, linking ideas across texts, and writing to

convey specific understandings. Each of these skills are consistently named as valuable to students' literacy development and bemoaned as absent from the repertoire of too many students' literacy strategies (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999).

But the critical literacy research process offers something else that is equally important. Like *Out of the Dust*, many critically acclaimed and school-sanctioned texts distort or marginalize the experiences of some while glorifying others, particularly those of the mainstream. The reality faced by our students is that school curricula and texts marginalize too many experiences in relation not only to race but sexuality (Raible & Nieto, 2003; Sadowski, 2003), religion (Zine, 2000), economic status (Brantlinger, 2003), gender (Orenstein, 1994), and English language fluency (Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999).

Moreover, many students are intensely aware of the gaps in the texts they are required to read and, as a result, suspicious of the content they are being taught. The critical literacy research process offers educators one method of addressing those marginalizations and helping students use the power of literacy, particularly historical fiction, to create texts that speak to and challenge those biases.

In creating *Out of the Dust*, Karen Hesse used her immense talent to explore and complicate understandings of the White experience of the Dustbowl. While the resulting text ignores issues of social injustice, it is intriguing to imagine the possibilities that would result if a writer of her skill chose to address them.

Through such a work, readers would be able to explore, to empathize, and to see with new eyes the themes of injustice that are woven into our country's history. Through such a text, perhaps one created by a student in a classroom that incorporates the critical literacy research process described in this article, social injustice could be not only examined but addressed in a way that leads to transformation.

Note

¹ The experience of Asian-Americans in Oklahoma remains to be explored by historians with greater expertise than I. According to Census figures, the Asian-American population numbered 187 in 1910, 344 in 1920 and 339 in 1930 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

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